

# Inuit perspectives on sustaining bilingualism in Nunavut

## Les perspectives inuit sur le maintien du bilinguisme au Nunavut

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### Résumé de l'article

Cet article présente une perspective inuit sur la réalisation et le maintien du bilinguisme au Nunavut. Le Conseil de l'alphabétisation du Nunavut a interviewé des "modèles linguistiques" (des Inuit qui sont exemplaires dans leur acquisition, utilisation et transmission de la langue) afin d'obtenir leur opinion sur le langage, la littérature et les processus d'apprentissage dans leurs communautés. L'analyse de ces entrevues démontre que ces modèles linguistiques gèrent les pratiques langagières, les activités de subsistance, les compétences et pratiques sociales et socio-économiques comme étant des parties intégrantes d'un tout. Le bilinguisme et la bilittératie sont conceptualisés comme des continuums de la pratique langagière, où des formes d'expression privilégiées reflètent les valeurs inuit, et sont liées à des utilisations et aboutissements spécifiques. Selon les modèles linguistiques, l'apprentissage de la langue est une activité à vie et holistique, fondée sur l'exemple et ancrée dans un contexte significatif et sécuritaire, incluant les lieux, les activités et les relations. Leurs perspectives sont essentielles au développement de stratégies informelles pour soutenir un bilinguisme grandissant au Nunavut.

# Inuit perspectives on sustaining bilingualism in Nunavut

Shelley Tulloch,\* Quluaq Pilakapsi, Monica Shouldice, Kim Crockatt, Cayla Chenier, and Janet Onalik\*\*

**Résumé:** Les perspectives inuit sur le maintien du bilinguisme au Nunavut

Cet article présente une perspective inuit sur la réalisation et le maintien du bilinguisme au Nunavut. Le Conseil de l'alphabétisation du Nunavut a interviewé des «modèles linguistiques» (des Inuit qui sont exemplaires dans leur acquisition, utilisation et transmission de la langue) afin d'obtenir leur opinion sur le langage, la littératie et les processus d'apprentissage dans leurs communautés. L'analyse de ces entrevues démontre que ces modèles linguistiques gèrent les pratiques langagières, les activités de subsistance, les compétences et pratiques sociales et socio-économiques comme étant des parties intégrantes d'un tout. Le bilinguisme et la bilittératie sont conceptualisés comme des continuums de la pratique langagière, où des formes d'expression privilégiées reflètent les valeurs inuit, et sont liées à des utilisations et aboutissements spécifiques. Selon les modèles linguistiques, l'apprentissage de la langue est une activité à vie et holistique, fondée sur l'exemple et ancrée dans un contexte significatif et sécuritaire, incluant les lieux, les activités et les relations. Leurs perspectives sont essentielles au développement de stratégies informelles pour soutenir un bilinguisme grandissant au Nunavut.

**Abstract:** Inuit perspectives on sustaining bilingualism in Nunavut

This article presents an Inuit perspective on how bilingualism and biliteracy may be achieved and sustained in Nunavut. The Nunavut Literacy Council interviewed "language role models" (i.e., Inuit who are admired for their skill in acquiring, using, and transmitting language) in order to gain their insights into language, literacy, and learning processes in their communities. Interviews show that the role models articulate language, subsistence, social, and socioeconomic skills and practices as parts of an integrated whole. Bilingualism and biliteracy are conceptualised as continua of practice, where prioritised forms of expression reflect Inuit values, and are linked to specific uses and outcomes. Role models present language learning as lifelong, holistic, modelling-based, and anchored in meaningful and safe contexts, including spaces, activities, and relationships. Their perspectives are essential for the development of non-formal educational strategies to support thriving bilingualism in Nunavut.

## Introduction

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The Nunavut Literacy Council promotes literacy and supports literacy initiatives in Nunavut's official languages: Inuktitut/Inuinnaqtun, English, and French. Its primary activities include advocacy, information-sharing, training, and resource development. The Council recognises the need for locally developed, contextually shaped definitions of literacy to drive programs, as advocated, for example by Street (2000: 125), "Literacy practices vary with cultural context, there is not a single, monolithic autonomous literacy [...] rather, there are [...] 'literacies' or rather 'literacy practices' whose character and consequences have to be specified for each context" and Bhola (1994: 34), "Each literacy project, programme or campaign needs to [...] come up with its own particular definition of literacy in its particular setting." Working with Nunavummiut, the Council tends to define literacy in an Inuit context as "a skill that enables people to interpret and effectively respond to the world around them. Based upon language development from birth, it includes the ability to learn, communicate, read and write, pass on knowledge and participate actively in society" (Nunavut Literacy Council n.d.). This working definition focuses on specific skills, such as reading and writing (UNESCO 2004), but also allows for other communicative practices and ways of learning, sharing knowledge, and participating in society as is increasingly being emphasised among Indigenous peoples, including the Inuit (e.g., Balanoff and Chambers 2005). The Council has sought to understand actual literacy practices and goals among the Nunavummiut in relation to broader social, cultural, political and economic contexts in Nunavut, while taking a "new literacies" approach (Street 2001, 2006).

Bilingualism is an established goal in Nunavut. Despite strong, though perhaps not unanimous, support for bilingual development, the Inuit language is known and used by fewer and fewer people. The Nunavut Literacy Council has experienced this tension between goal and reality first-hand while promoting literacy in Nunavut communities. It thus launched a research initiative to discover Nunavummiut goals for language transmission, competence, and behaviour, and how these goals fit into broader aspirations in Nunavut. Furthermore, the initiative set out to identify local understandings of how learning takes place. Based on interviews with "language role models" (i.e., those who are respected and admired for the ways in which they are acquiring, using, and transmitting the Inuit language), this article explores Inuit perspectives on bilingualism, biliteracy, and learning. It suggests how these understandings can inform the development of strategies, policy, and programming to help Nunavummiut achieve thriving bilingualism.

### **Bilingualism, biliteracy, and community-partnered research**

The Nunavut Literacy Council supports language and literacy development in a multilingual context that is common in Indigenous communities around the world. At least two languages and sets of literacy practices are widely used (Hot 2008): one ancestral to the majority population (Inuit) and another originally imposed from the outside (English and, to some degree, French). While both are valued, the economic and political weight of English combined with years of deliberate assimilation have led

to a language shift whereby bilingual individuals and communities are gradually adopting the colonially imposed language (English) for more and more of their communication (including child socialisation). The ancestral language (Inuktitut or Inuinnaqtun) is thus decreasingly known and used (Cooper 2007; Dorais 2006; Dorais and Sammons 2002; Tulloch 2004; for theoretical discussion of language shift across contexts, see Kaplan and Baldauf 1997). Perhaps in response to this shift, Inuit have become particularly interested in aspects of the Council's work which contribute to the vitality of their language. If the Inuit can use their language in a wide range of contexts and see their forms of literacy respected, they will be better able to overcome the hegemony of English language, literacy, and institutions. This was one of the reasons for creating Nunavut. For the same reason, the Nunavut Literacy Council wishes to understand how the Inuit conceptualise literacy and learning in order to develop culturally appropriate and effective programming, the ultimate aim being to motivate learners and support Inuit language literacy.

Within this context, the Nunavut Literacy Council launched a project to examine Inuit perspectives on language and literacy development. The approach was solutions-based: team members recognised that many Inuit *are* developing and maintaining varied and rich language practices, passing them on to their children and grandchildren, and seeing their offspring grow up as strong bilinguals in the Inuit language and English. Such individuals and families became the project focus. What do these "language role models" already know about language, literacy, and learning, and how do they support the learning of those around them? Language and learning were approached holistically to understand how achievement of strong language and literacy skills fits into broader social, political, cultural, and economic changes and aspirations in Nunavut.

The research team included: Nunavut Literacy Council board members from communities across Nunavut (primarily Inuit, who facilitated travel and research in their home communities); Nunavut Literacy Council staff; an external policy advisor; and an external research advisor. All team members were active from research design through to the communication of results. They worked together bilingually, with interpreters present at most meetings and with translators (or team members) producing Inuit language or English versions of working documents to facilitate sharing and communication.

To identify language role models, the team agreed on a working definition: "a language role model is a parent of any age who works to strengthen their own Inuit language skills and also encourages and assists other people in their community to do the same. A language role model might be someone who works to strengthen language informally and does not necessarily get formal recognition for this work."<sup>1</sup> Board members from Whale Cove, Rankin Inlet, Cambridge Bay, and Talurjuaq combined this definition with their intuitions to identify five role models per community (total =

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<sup>1</sup> A bilingual description of the research, including the complete interview template in Inuktitut and English, is available online at [http://www.nunavutliteracy.ca/english/resource/langlit/com\\_research.pdf](http://www.nunavutliteracy.ca/english/resource/langlit/com_research.pdf).

20).<sup>2</sup> The selected role models came from a wide range of backgrounds. While elders made up approximately half the group, there were also middle-aged parents and even young parents (age breakdown: 5 individuals over 70; 4 aged 60-69; 2 aged 50-59; 3 aged 40-49; 4 aged 30-39; 1 aged 20-29; and 1 under 20). Although males and females were almost equally represented in the older age groups (6 males and 5 females over 50), everyone under 50 was female (9). The role models had a variety of educational backgrounds, ranging from no formal schooling to post-secondary training. Some worked in office jobs, others as entrepreneurs, elder-consultants/teachers, artists/carvers, seamstresses, daycare workers, translators, janitors, and stay-at-home parents or grandparents. The board members thus broadly conceptualised their notion of role model.

Inuit staff of the Nunavut Literacy Council (Inuk elder and educator Quluag Pilakapsi and Inuk teacher Monica Shouldice) travelled to each community to conduct interviews, with the assistance of a local board member. They asked the role models:

- what skills they wished for their children and grandchildren in the future;
- how they conceptualised bilingualism and biliteracy (including associated knowledge, skills, practices, and values);
- how they understood the learning process (including how they helped their children and grandchildren become and remain strong Inuit language users, even alongside English).

The board members were also interviewed about their own observations of the role models and why they considered the person an appropriate choice. Interview data were complemented by radio call-in shows in the target communities, as well as one Nunavut-wide CBC call-in show. Data were collected in the language chosen by the role models/radio callers, primarily in the Inuit language. The interviews and radio shows were tape-recorded and then translated or transcribed in English.<sup>3</sup>

Analysis took place in three stages. Following data collection, the research team met to discuss the main ideas and themes in the interviews and on the radio shows. The research advisor then analysed the transcripts, using NVivo software for qualitative analysis, identifying the main themes and coding the data accordingly. The main themes were “motivation/beliefs,” “challenges,” “successes,” “learning,” “skills,” and “practices.” After initial coding, results were analysed by theme and then re-coded in terms of sub-themes that emerged from the data (e.g., based on interview comments, “skills” was subdivided into “language,” “socioeconomic,” “subsistence,” and “social” skills). Some of the sub-themes were then further broken down and analysed. Following the analysis, results were discussed with the research team and presented at

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<sup>2</sup> Because of funding constraints and the existence of recent sociolinguistic studies (Cooper 2006; Dorais 2006; Dorais and Sammons 2002; Hot 2008; Tulloch 2004), Baffin communities were not included. The Council selected the regional centre and a smaller community in both the Kivalliq and Kitikmeot regions of Nunavut. Each of these communities had a resident board member on the Nunavut Literacy Council.

<sup>3</sup> Quotes in this paper are translations from the original.

workshops in each region, where feedback came from community members and literacy practitioners.

The research helped reveal Inuit perspectives on language, literacy, and learning in Nunavut, as Inuit researchers interacted with Inuit role models about their shared experiences. The collected perspectives impart an understanding of how and why lifelong learning of the Inuit language may be sustained, as explained by people who are admired for the way they develop and transmit language skills. These perspectives will be summarized in the following sections and contextualised with other language-related research and policy developments in Nunavut.

## **Conceptualising language and literacy**

Language and literacy seem to be conceptualised as contextual practices that are integrated with other aspects of life. The Inuit conceptualise “skills,” *ajunngi*- in the Inuit language interviews, as a combination of knowledge, ability, and practice. “Skills” are what one is able to do, for specific purposes. A skilled bilingual is one who knows and can use of the Inuit language and English to fulfil specific personal needs for social interaction (especially being welcoming), for education (formal and non-formal), for finding or doing a job, and for subsistence.

When the interviewees were asked what they wished for themselves and for their children, their answers fell into the sub-themes “subsistence,” “socioeconomic,” and “social development” along with “language” in concurrent and overlapping ways. These sub-themes seem to be considered parts of a comprehensive and integrated package, where language and literacy development are integral to other goals. Sometimes the link is explicit. Yolande Aupalu, a Talurjuaq mother, explained that knowing both the Inuit language and English is an advantage for finding employment in Nunavut: “Of course, because they’re going to have to find jobs, I’d like them to be able to understand and read and write well in Inuktitut and English. They say, in the near future, that those who are bilingual in Inuktitut and English will be better qualified for jobs.”<sup>4</sup> Whale Cove elder Mary Kanajuq Voisey observed that learning in Inuktitut fosters both development of this language and educational/socioeconomic success, despite some fears that putting it first would keep children from “succeeding in their life”:

In the beginning I had wanted my children to learn English first, because of the fear that they will not succeed in their life in Arviat. I was afraid that to learn Inuktitut would take away the precious time of learning the English language. [...] My son has graduated from Grade 12 with very good Inuktitut language skills. He is able to read and write in Inuktitut. I am very happy about that. They will not get behind in their work if they take Inuktitut. I am very happy that they are able to read in Inuktitut first and then on to the (English) higher

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<sup>4</sup> This perception is substantiated in the Inuit Language Protection Act, which now protects and promotes Inuit language speakers’ access to the workplace (Nunavut Legislative Assembly 2008b).

grades. Some people think that they will get behind in their grades if they take Inuktitut first but that is not true.

These observations by Voisey and other role models are substantiated by other researchers. Taylor and Wright (2003) reported, based on a 10-year study in Nunavik, that Inuit children educated in the Inuit language show better school engagement, higher scholastic achievement, and higher individual and collective self-esteem than do those educated in one of the dominant languages. Similarly, Cummins (2000) argued that incorporation of children's mother tongue and cultural practices into school curricula is key to educational (academic, cognitive) and personal (social, emotional, cultural) empowerment, in addition to favouring linguistic development in both the mother tongue and the dominant language. Berger (2006) concluded that weak bilingual schooling was fundamentally to blame for under-representation of Inuit in government jobs in Nunavut, again explicitly linking language to broader goals.

The interviews also implicitly stressed the need to integrate socioeconomic, subsistence, social, and language skills and practices. Whale Cove elder Jackie Napajuq was typical in alternating between the sub-themes of jobs, subsistence, being a good or welcoming person, and language skills:

Quluaq: What job skills would you want your grandchild to have in Inuktitut and English?

Jackie: I would like for the girls to know how to make traditional clothing, such as kamiks, amauti, mitts, and caribou skin parkas. It is our tradition to know these skills. I want them to know about today's jobs skills for their future. Years ago if you did not know how to speak English it was okay. [...] It is better today, because they are able to speak both languages. They have to know the two languages for today's lifestyle [...]. I tell them to keep their language but it is also much better to learn both. [...] In the past [...] they would tell us that we had to learn so that we would learn how to take care of our parents. [...]

Quluaq: What would you want in your house as a teaching material that has to do with language?

Jackie: Learning to sew and welcoming conversation in Inuktitut because it gives you comfort and strength. Learning about snow and making igloos if you do not want to learn in the house. [...]

Quluaq: What type of skill would you think your grandchildren or your great grandchildren should have for the future?

Jackie: There will be many different things happening when we are gone. I want them to know about religion and the Bible [...]. I want them to care for others and be good to them. I want them to be good to those who have no parents and share with them what they have.

Even when language or job-related skills and practices were discussed, the role models spoke equally of socioeconomic, social, and subsistence skills/practices. This holistic vision is also reflected in *Pinasuaqtavut*, the Government of Nunavut's mandate, where language underpins broader values and strategies for achieving a strong society,

including “*tunnganarniq*, fostering good spirit by being open, welcoming and inclusive,” “*aaqqiqatigiinni*q, decision making through discussion and consensus,” and “*pijarnirniqsatkatujjiqatigiittianrirlu*, simplicity and unity” (Government of Nunavut 2004: 3-4). The implication is that language and literacy should be understood not as a distinct set of skills or as a distinct desired educational outcome, but as an integral part of achieving and sustaining the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement’s goals of “self-reliance and the cultural and social well-being of Inuit” (DIAND and TFN 1993: 245).

The types of bilingual and biliterate practices that the role models admire and aspire to, for themselves and for their children, also reflect the link between knowledge, ability, and specific practices. While most comments about bilingualism addressed the ability to understand and make oneself understood in everyday encounters, role models also spoke of context-specific abilities. Some of these abilities relate to education and work, such as reading and writing, keyboarding, translating, and knowledge of specialised work-related vocabulary (in the Inuit language and English), and so on. Others are linked to Inuit traditional knowledge, practices and values: storytelling, singing, as well as knowledge and appropriate use of specialised vocabulary (e.g., kinship terms and place names). Again, admired abilities are integral to broader purposes and practices.

There are degrees of bilingualism and biliteracy along several continua, ranging from passive understanding to productive use, from oral to literate expression, from contextualised to decontextualised uses, and from preference for the ancestral language to preference for the dominant one. This reality is implicit in the role models’ comments and is explicit in Hornberger and Sylvester’s (2000) revised continua model of biliteracy. When asked to define “thriving bilingualism,” the role models prioritised the Inuit language over English, and receptive and basic communicative competence in both languages over productive and more specialised competence in either. Such skills are prioritized partly because they serve to transmit and develop all other skills and partly because they are needed for the valued social practice of being welcoming and accommodating. Specialised and context-specific practices are valued too, including ability to communicate across dialectal boundaries and to use language to integrate into the workplace and to participate in Inuit culture.

These admired practices contrast somewhat with dominant Western perceptions of bilingualism and biliteracy, which tend to favour practices associated with the colonially introduced language(s), literacy tradition(s), and institutions. As Hornberger and Sylvester (2000) pointed out, these imposed practices were historically seen (from a Western perspective) as the more powerful and prestigious forms, an attitude contributing to language shift. The role models challenged such prejudices by defining thriving bilingualism and biliteracy on their own terms. Their definition privileges skills and practices that meet specific community needs and help Inuit fully participate in Nunavut’s socioeconomic and cultural opportunities.



## Conceptualising learning processes

Inuit conceptualise language and literacy as being contextual and as existing along a continuum. This view has implications for the development of effective language and literacy programming in Nunavut. In this section, we will present Inuit perspectives on learning—lifelong, contextual, relational, and modelling-based—to flesh out how bilingualism and biliteracy may be achieved.

The role models perceived learning as a lifelong cycle of exposure, motivation to understand and appropriate what one is exposed to, practice, and improvement, which in turn leads to better ability to observe. They conceptualised “education” as occurring in and out of school, before, during, and long after the years of formal schooling. All affirmed that they were still learning and wished to continue just as they also passed on what they knew. This attitude was apparent when Rankin Inlet elder John Tautunngi answered the question, “Are your children/grandchildren still learning language?” “Yes, as I am still learning,” and he emphasized, “I think everyone wants to be learning all the time.” A Talurjuaq father asserted: “I am 55 years old. I still want to learn and I am still learning everyday.” As Whale Cove elder Mary Kanajuq Voisey stressed: “We are always learning even if we are old. Our body might get old but our minds never get too old to learn. Listening to the local radio and the C.B. is where I relearn words I’ve lost in the past from the elders. I will recognise the words and add them to the list in my mind I already have and use them.” New skills are constantly being learned and old skills improved upon or remembered and reinvigorated following periods of disuse.

The Government of Nunavut’s mandate, *Pinasuaqtavut*, also advocates for *ilippallianguinnarniq* (‘continuing learning’):

We believe that it is only by developing a culture of lifelong learning that Nunavummiut can reach their full potential. The values that will guide us are: [...]

- Land and language skills and respectful pride in our cultures and languages are fundamental for adults and children; [...]

In 2020, Nunavut is a place where:

- Our population is adaptable to change and welcomes new skills, while preserving its culture, values and language of origin;
- We are a fully functional bilingual society, in Inuktitut and English [...] (Government of Nunavut 2004: 15)

According to the role models, learning occurs when they or their children have many opportunities throughout the day to hear, to see, and to interact in a wide range of language uses—with family members, at school, at work, in the media, and in written or oral texts. As Mary Kaniak, a Cambridge Bay elder explained:

They will surely understand if you continue to speak to them. They may forget words but will retrieve it later when you speak to them. [...] Yes, if they continue seeing Inuinnaqtun they will learn; as I cannot see [my grandchildren] all of the time, for myself, whenever I see them and speak with them using my language, they have a tough time, because they hear the English language all of the time, that’s why. [...] Every time students are off school they

should be playing [and] doing things with their parents around them. They will surely learn the Inuktitut language as they get older too. [...] Why are they picking up the English language so quickly and not learning the Inuktitut language? I don't even know. Is it because they aren't hearing the Inuinnaqtun language?

Learning the Inuit language is said to suffer from the lack of time that one is exposed to it.<sup>5</sup> The role models sensed that English is being learned even when not deliberately taught, as a result of frequent exposure to rich and varied uses of that language. Meanwhile, opportunities for rich exposure to the Inuit language are becoming harder to come by. To help develop excellent Inuit language skills, the role models suggest that parents should deliberately use only that language and create opportunities to be around it and to use it. It is important to model the skills one wishes children and grandchildren to acquire, where "teaching" is simply spending time together, acting out the desired educational outcome, and providing opportunities to try out the skill. This point was summed up by John Tautunngi, Rankin Inlet elder, when Quluaq asked, "Have you taught them language?" He replied, "I do not teach them but only talk to them." A caller to the Cambridge Bay radio call-in show described the myriad ways she exposes her children to the Inuinnaqtun language:

To keep my language strong in my home I speak to my children in Inuinnaqtun, teach them how to sew, attend Inuinnaqtun church service, learning how to read the Bible, have my children speak and listen to the elders, using the traditional tools like the ulu and taking them out on the ski-doo and sled and visiting people that have traditional dog teams. [...] We all need to learn together. [...] And for the training we should interact with our elders and [be] learning more stories and getting new ideas from them. [...] All I can do is sit back and listen and hear what they say and gather their knowledge for myself because one day I will be an elder.

Some role models pointed out that learning through modelling and practice takes perseverance and cannot be pushed. Learning is hindered when stuffed into too tight schedules or when time is taken up by other activities.

The role models had seen learning success when people entered contexts where their learning was meaningful. Context includes the physical space and the activity through which the learning occurs, as well as the relationships involved in it (e.g., hunting with family members on the land; sewing in an elder's living room). Many role models emphasised, implicitly or explicitly, the effectiveness of learning the Inuit language while on the land and while participating in Inuit cultural activities. Isaac Panigayak, a Talurjuaq father, explained his children's learning this way:

I show my children, when we go out hunting, I show them and they learn by watching me and I explain what I am doing or how to do things at the same time. When they pick up what I've taught them, sometimes they get even better than me. Or else I teach them names of the different places out [on the] land. [...] When they see and hear the stories being told on TV,

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<sup>5</sup> Note that empirical studies on Inuit children in Nunavik with "high" English exposure and those with "low" English exposure (defined as the proportion of non-Inuit in the community) were inconclusive as to the effect of exposure to English on Inuktitut language skills (Allen et al. 2006).

and by visiting elders, listening to them reminds us/them of what has been forgotten and adds to their knowledge.

[...] I can't explain it well, but by listening to them and talking to them myself, that helps. [...] I notice things they've learned from me, like seal hunting, predicting the weather, fishing, and knowing which way to go out [on the] land, caribou hunting. Maybe they're not taught everything, but they're capable on their own now.

To create meaningful contexts and motivation for learning and using the Inuit language, one should create a monolingual home environment. This was the home environment of those role models who said their children had achieved and maintained excellent skills in both the Inuit language and English. When role models combined English and the Inuit language at home, they reported that their children had excellent English language skills, but moderate Inuit language skills. These observations are corroborated by Statistics Canada's 2001 Aboriginal Peoples Survey. Figure 1 shows that children's competence in the Inuit language closely mirrors frequency of parents' use in the home (but *not* parents' competence).

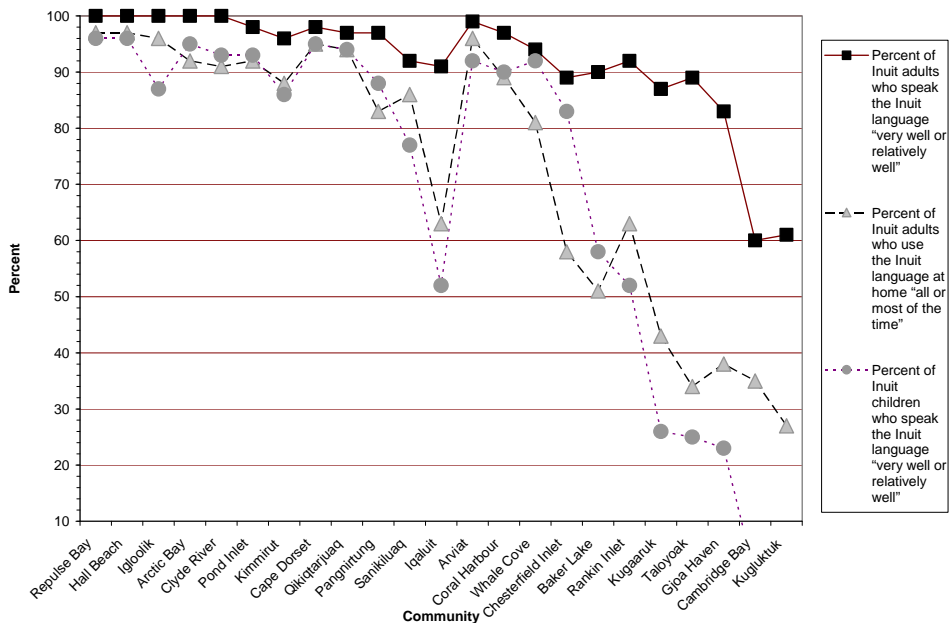


Figure 1. Link between language use in the home and children's language ability.

Individuals are motivated to learn when they have the opportunity and/or the need to use the skills/abilities (New London Group 2000). A barrier to development of Inuit language skills (or abilities and practice) is the loss of context for learning—e.g., parents and children, elders and youth spending less time together. People particularly learn language when they are motivated to interact, and when they feel safe and valued.

Improvement occurs by making mistakes and correction; learners should be encouraged to persevere and not be chastised for mistakes. Eileen Kakolak, a Cambridge Bay mother explained:

[M]y father-in-law taught me all this knowledge [...] how to put lanterns and stoves on. I didn't know anything. My father-in-law was a really good man. He said don't worry about the holes you make because if you keep worrying about them you're not going to get good, so I just made holes from top to bottom and I started to get better and better.

Mary Ann Tattuinee, a Rankin Inlet elder, described a similarly open approach to her daughters' learning:

My own daughters [...] I am wanting them to learn much more now [...]. This winter I urged my daughter-in-law to learn to sew, I told her even if you are not capable, you can learn, even if it makes you cry—you can cry, they can come to the point of crying but that's okay. There has never been a person born who immediately knows how to sew!

Thus, learning is ongoing and happens in a welcoming environment.

To develop learning-friendly contexts, one should foster relationships, identify relevant learning environments, facilitate meaningful activities, and ensure the outcome has a use outside the activity. Role models like Isaac Panigayak, Mary Ann Tattuinee, and others talked about the usefulness of the skills they had passed on and the pride that they felt in seeing the skills being used. Learners, like Whale Cove mother Sharon Qijuk, saw teaching as an expression of love:

My late grandmother, Ilaaitutnaaq, used to teach others how to work on caribou skins, sewing skills or how to make hats [...], she used to teach me. [...] This has become more real to me today. I realise it more today how much I was loved and how important it was for her to teach me what she knows.

Family and community help by strengthening relationships and pride throughout the learning process, in addition to achieving particular educational outcomes.

Learning is lifelong. It occurs through ongoing exposure and practice, being anchored in meaningful contexts and community relationships. This view of learning resonates with John Manilak, Talurjuaq elder:

Quluq: How did your children learn Inuktitut?

Manilak: Their mother only spoke Inuktitut and she would always push them to speak only Inuktitut. [...]

Quluq: How do you teach them the Inuktitut language?

Manilak: I do not teach them so much. But today as parents, we do not do enough. We depend on the teachers too much. We should be working with them and share our knowledge with them.

Quluaq: Are the barriers when you want to teach them?

Manilak: The barrier is when they are not fluent in both languages [...]

Quluaq: Do you know what types of materials would be helpful to teach the Inuktitut language?

Manilak: Learning about the traditional way of living, sewing, and learn[ing] about the men and women's tools. Sometimes when we only hear about them it is too easy to forget. It is better to make them so that we will not forget. It might be hard at first but we can learn. We can do those ourselves instead of depending on the teachers.

Quluaq: How would you teach your child language?

Manilak: I would prefer to teach them out in the land. Such as building igloos, seal hunting, or fishing. They have to see and do, just the same way we were taught by our parents. Many of us think this way. We remember how we were raised.

Quluaq: Have you ever said to yourself, "She knows this because I have taught her"?

Manilak: I have taught my older children more than the younger ones. I let them observe me. I noticed that they know how to build igloos and shelters out in the land. [...]

Quluaq: Is what you have taught them helpful to you?

Manilak: Yes, it is very helpful to me. [...]

Quluaq: What do they do to learn on their own about language?

Manilak: They should go to the elders or go to the school. We, the elders, are just waiting for them to ask questions.

This emphasis on contextual, meaningful learning (and learning motivated by opportunity or need) is consistent with research on literacy development. The Inuit Holistic Lifelong Learning Model developed by the Canadian Council on Learning in collaboration with the Inuit (CCL 2007) acknowledges formal and informal learning, in various contexts, for all ages. It links learning to Inuit values, culture, family and, ultimately, community well-being. The New London Group (2000: 31) underlines the complexity of attempting to isolate skills and practices from each other and from their context:

[H]uman knowledge, when it is applicable to practice, is primarily situated in sociocultural settings and heavily contextualised in specific knowledge domains and practices. Such knowledge is inextricably tied to the ability to recognise and act on patterns of data and experience, a process that is only acquired through experience, since the requisite patterns are often heavily tied and adjusted to context, and are, very often, subtle and complex enough that no one can usefully describe or explicate them. [...] Such pattern recognition underlies the ability to act flexibly and adaptably in context—that is, mastery in practice.

These conceptualisations of literacy and learning do not necessarily fit a school-based model. Understanding them will make it possible to develop culturally relevant and effective supports for the achievement and maintenance of bilingualism in Nunavut.

### **Bilingualism before and beyond school**

Efforts are already underway in Nunavut to create contexts and programs that will help the Inuit language thrive alongside the increasing presence and use of English. Two areas of support are specified in new legislation: opportunities to use the Inuit language at work, i.e., creating a context where it is economically valuable; opportunity and incentive for on-the-job learning, as per the Inuit Language Protection Act (Nunavut Legislative Assembly 2008b); and education in Inuit language from kindergarten through Grade 12 (*ibid.* 2008a). These initiatives are essential because they relieve fears that putting the Inuit language first will hinder personal success. Still, they do not go far enough. More tangible supports are required in those cases where parents and grandparents feel disempowered to support their children's or grandchildren's language development. As a caller to the Talurjuaq radio show lamented: "I struggle to help my grandchildren because they do not understand Inuktitut. [...] I really want to help them but [...] I have a hard time sometimes to make them understand what we are trying to say."

Bilingual schooling, under Nunavut's Education Act, provides one support to thriving bilingualism. Aylward (2006), Cooper (2007), Corson (2000), Martin (2000b), and Tompkins (2004), among others, have documented the desire of Nunavummiut for effective bilingual schooling, and suggest how such programming will help achieve the desired socioeconomic, social, and language outcomes. Bilingual programming will be key to achieving bilingualism in communities where intergenerational transmission is threatened, where only a minority of young Inuit adults now speak the Inuit language well.<sup>6</sup> Even in communities where children are learning the Inuit language first, they spend so much time in school that it becomes a place of language loss if the school environment is not supportive (Dorais 2006; Tulloch 2004; Wright et al. 2000). In either case, strong programming in the Inuit language is necessary if young Inuit are going to use it later as their language of work.

Still, the goal of bilingualism, and the interlinked outcomes of proficiency in socioeconomic, social, and subsistence skills, as presented by the role models, cannot be addressed by the school system alone. Language shift is occurring, in some cases, faster than the bilingual educational strategy is being implemented. To place children in an Inuit language program with a strong foundation that will carry them through their schooling, it will be necessary to give parents and children support in the pre-school years. Language and literacy must be developed at home even during the years of school attendance. According to Dorais and Sammons (2002), once children are in

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<sup>6</sup> E.g., census data show the percentage of Aboriginal children speaking an Aboriginal language increasing, sometimes dramatically, in communities with strong immersion programs (Norris 2007).

school and learning English, some parents who had previously used only Inuit language with their children switch to English. Likewise according to the role models, even where children are exposed to rich language use as much as possible, peers and the media strongly affect their language practice. As the role models pointed out, use of the Inuit language should be encouraged at home, among peers, and in the media to counter these pressures. Finally, the schools alone cannot achieve the goal of bilingualism because the target populations will not all attend Nunavut schools. Youth and adults, in particular, require non-formal learning opportunities to acquire and enhance Inuit language skills.

The role models warned against relying on the schools, which are not always the best place for achieving the desired kind of bilingualism and biliteracy. Street (2001: 13) argued that formal, schooled literacy is not the best starting place or target for literacy programming: “Delivering such formalised literacy [in contexts which value other forms of literacy and learning] will not lead to empowerment, will not facilitate jobs and will not create social mobility.” UNESCO (2008) advocated early childhood and non-formal learning programs (in addition to formal education) in order to improve overall educational outcomes. While schools play a definite role in educating a certain group of Nunavummiut and transmitting certain types of knowledge, skills, and practices, there must also be opportunities to learn before, outside, and after the years of school attendance.

Pursuant to calls from Berger (2006) and Martin (2000a), Article 9 of the Inuit Language Protection Act (Nunavut Legislative Assembly 2008b) and Article 17 of the Education Act (*ibid.* 2008a) do allow for early childhood education in the Inuit language. To achieve this goal, however, the mechanisms and guidelines are not as clear as they are, for instance, for the goal of Inuit language as the language of work or as a language of instruction. The existing Inuit language daycare centres in Nunavut result from grassroots initiatives. They meet pre-school learning needs by giving children hours of exposure to the Inuit language and by encouraging language use among peers. The daycare centres involve a certain level of community engagement and incorporate Inuit cultural practices and values, reminiscent of the Indigenous language nests (Te Kohanga Reo) developed first in New Zealand (King 2001) and then successfully replicated in other Indigenous settings. The language nest model, with its emphasis on community, relationship, holistic learning, and integrated practice seems particularly well-suited to the goals identified by the Inuit role models. It could lay a foundation for thriving bilingualism in Nunavut.<sup>7</sup>

“Land” or “culture” camps are another type of non-formal programming that has been tried in Nunavut, with positive feedback from participants. These programs integrate development of land, language, and general “well-being” practices. For example, Somebody’s Daughter, a program run by the Kivalliq Inuit Association, brings women onto the land, together with elders and an author, in order to co-develop

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<sup>7</sup> Another model of early childhood education, Head Start, is also being tried in some Inuit contexts: Patrick and Tomiak (2008) report its success among urban Inuit in Ottawa.

subsistence and literacy practices. Reading and writing are highly personal, relational, and communicative. The participants develop relationships and experience healing in these programs, which are initiated at the grassroots and evaluated locally. Such programs are particularly promising for developing bilingualism in line with the conceptualisations of language and learning put forth by the role models.

Another model of non-formal learning is the “master-apprentice program.” Master-apprentice was first developed as an Indigenous language revitalisation strategy in California (Hinton 200; Hinton et al. 2002) and has since been adapted to other contexts around the world. It pairs competent language users with learners in order to recreate one-on-one informal, oral language transmission. The pair receives some training in language transmission, although most of the learning is simply through modelling and sharing of day-to-day life, which may include transmission of other knowledge and skills. Particular areas of success have been in training young adults in the language and in bringing youth into mentoring relationships with elders. Such a program has not yet been tried in Nunavut but may effectively help young Inuit parents improve their language skills, in order to be better equipped to pass the language on to their children.<sup>8</sup>

The above learning models—“language nests,” “land camps,” and “master-apprentice”—put into practice the perspectives on language and learning of the Nunavut Literacy Council role models. There is weak support for them in Nunavut (in contrast with strong support for other forms of language promotion). This reflects perhaps the disconnect between local (Indigenous) and dominant (non-Indigenous) understandings of language development and learning. If funding agencies are accustomed to independent and task-focused learning, they might have trouble understanding non-formal, experiential, and holistic programs as being equivalent—or internally more relevant. Yet, as the role models have shown, practices and skills develop concurrently in the areas of language, subsistence, socialisation, and socioeconomic success. These complementary learning outcomes are better achieved by means of holistic programs. Such programs will require sustained governmental support.

## Conclusion

This article has considered approaches to achieving and sustaining bilingualism in Nunavut based on interviews with Inuit language role models. These individuals are admired for their lifelong transmission and acquisition of knowledge. They described how bilingualism *is* being achieved in their families, and how facility with language is

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<sup>8</sup> In the role models’ interviews, even elders felt inadequate to pass on skills, as they saw themselves as less competent than their parents, who had taught them. Younger parents especially seemed to worry that the Inuit language they had to pass on was not “good enough.” While master-apprentice offers opportunities to upgrade skills, there appears to be a deeper need to help individuals to recognise the value of existing skills and each person’s role as a teacher (through everyday actions that are modelled) regardless of training, education, or specific times set aside for learning.



linked to participation and engagement in school, jobs, subsistence pursuits, families, and community life. They are moving forward with relatively little support in the way of materials, programming, or funding.

In light of the Government of Nunavut's commitment to achieve and maintain thriving bilingualism, this paper has suggested some strategies to promote learning opportunities before and beyond schooling. Adapting formal educational approaches to Inuit ways of learning promises multiple benefits. Programs to support early childhood education in the Inuit language can improve school readiness, laying the foundation for future learning. Alongside the schools, non-formal learning programs with Inuit-established goals and methods can contribute to educational outcomes. A community is thus stronger when people of all ages can spend time together, understand each other, and feel welcome. The act of sharing, including sharing of knowledge, is a source of pride and belonging. By listening to the role models, we can better understand how lifelong learning can support Inuit educational goals, including the achievement of strong, stable bilingualism.

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